

Dear Beloved Friends, fellow Spacefarers on Spaceship Earth

2012 was a big year for us as it was Nakira's first year at school and our little Sascha's "Year of the Word". We began the year as we have ever since Nakira was born with our two week holiday at Inverloch in January. Sascha delighted in playing by the sea, or "The Bath" as he called it whilst Nakira gathered sticks and seagrass and other flotsam from the beach to build scenes and wonderful stories out of in the dunes along the foreshore. My favourite was "the Precambrian Forest" which she imagined was a real forest that existed long before palaeontologists know that forests could live on land; Nakira decided that the Earth was so hot then that the forests couldn't become fossils and are thus still unknown to science so that her wonderful imaginary landscape could still be real in her mind. Nakira's stories are very private to her and she doesn't like being interrupted when she is imagining them because she is thinking about them so intensely, but in this one case I'd just HAD to impose myself on her to make a short video wherein I interviewed her for about two minutes about her forest, telling her that I wanted her to give me some special words so that I could always remember her Precambrian Forest. The video still has me falling off my chair in laughter, because one can clearly see Nakira is highly distracted and can barely brook giving me her precious time away from her imaginings just so that Papa can make a video whose worth she can barely acknowledge! Her last words in the video, after I had thanked her for telling us about her forest, were "that's okay Papa NOW GO!". It was a relaxed and easy time for Mindal and me and thoroughly enjoyed even though the weather was pretty wet, particularly throughout the second week. "The Red Elk" is a café in Inverloch that serves the best coffee in Victoria (at least I think so) so the wet weather gave us plenty of excuses to pack a swag of books for Sascha and Nakira and park ourselves in the "Elk" and indulge ourselves with caffeine and our children with their favourite stories.

Sascha's mastering of speech has been very different to witness from Nakira's speech at the same age. Nakira suffered hearing loss in her second year owing to the chronic snotty nose seems to befall all young children when they go to crèche and childcare at that age, so her speech was delayed and, when it did come, it came out in full sentences. I called it "Ikea" speech: the main bits came already there in "flat pack" by the time we heard them as just needed near final assembly. Whereas we got to hear every little new word and phrase as Sascha learnt them. Sometimes it almost seemed as though he were doing grammar or usage drill; he would grasp a new structure, a new turn of phrase, a new usage and revel in it for up to a week. One day, apparently when he was doing "English usage part 1473B: the pronoun 'Another'", I got to drive nearly the whole length of Warragul Road with Sascha gleefully chanting "There's a lamp post; there is another one lamppost, and another one lamppost, and another one, and..." with gleeful stress on each "another", not letting up the whole way between Surrey Hills and Oakleigh. I'm pretty sure it was the first time he had used the word "another". Or, one evening at the dinner table, it was apparently time for "Possessive Case and Absolute Genitives": "that's Sascha's plate, that's mummy's plate, that's big sister's plate, that papa's plate, that's Sascha's, that's big sister's, that's Papa's, that mummy's, that's mine...". It would be the kind of thing that would drive you to distraction but for the sheer joy that this little person is gushing as he grasps and wields his latest linguistic jewel. Sascha has amazingly expressive eyes and mouth - one of our nicknames for him is "the Superpout" - and one is seldom in any doubt as to what Sascha is feeling. An image I shall always keep with me of him is the following. One day last Winter Sascha and I were visiting my parents' house and Sascha took his Dora doll with him (for those of you who don't know, Dora was a doll that Sascha latched on to a toy fair and is his pretty constant companion; until about the middle of this year, she was indeed taller than Sascha). Sascha kept looking intently outside and was trying to take Dora out into the garden with him. For a while I didn't twig as to what was going on; I was too caught up in forbidding Sascha to take Dora into the sodden garden (she gets disgustingly dirty and hard to clean). But Sascha would not give in and in the end managed to sneak out the door when I wasn't watching. When I at last spotted him he had Dora firmly under one arm, the other arm bracing the first and he was walking slowly and warily, but steadily and highly resolutely, towards the shed in a dark corner of Mum and Dad's garden. I followed him but he paid no heed to me and instead kept his eyes fixed on the shed (I was expecting him to glance back and give me that cheeky look that says "I'm defying you Papa!"). When I reached him, the little face looked earnestly into mine as he said "I'm seeing the scary shed in the gloomy forest, Papa" (the trees in the corner of the garden were "the gloomy forest"). I was so impressed by the little fellow: there was a part of the garden that he thought interesting and wanted to explore, but at the same time it was a little frightening for him. Instead of letting his fears overcome him, he took hold of Dora and together they thrust forward notwithstanding; here I believe is a little fellow who, whilst definitely showing more caution than his wild big sister, is not going to let little worries get the better of him. This understanding of Sascha was somewhat of a relief to me as in March he had some minor surgery following up on an operation he had in September

2011. The first operation was thoroughly traumatic for him; indeed, his speech stopped developing for almost two months afterwards and he would not greet new people, instead of burying his face in my or Mindal's chest. However this year, whilst his second operation was truly terrifying for him, once it was over, he didn't seem to dwell on it. Hopefully, we shan't need any more surgery. Sascha found Nakira's going to school almost as big a deal as I did. I felt terribly down for the first few weeks that she wasn't at home with me, and Little Moo would endlessly ask me, "When are we going to pick Big Sister up?". Often this would begin as soon as we had got home from walking Nakira to school. A poignant abrupt preference for his "girl" stuffed toys and dolls bespoke his deeply missing Nakira and more than once he ran off at school and tried to hide himself in Nakira's classroom, even sitting in self on the mat in her room. As if I would simply give up and go off and leaving there without finding him!!

2012 was Nakira's first year at school and she positively thrived on all the activities school brought to her. She loved having an endless stream of books to read and she seemed to click well with the class's devoted teacher Eden Ralph. The building which houses Nakira's classroom was likely built around the same time that my own Prep classroom in Beaumaris and I was nearly bowled off my feet by the strength of memory evoked by the room's smell and the sound of the sliding door on its runners: I have no doubt those runners, with their unmistakable characteristic sound, are the same ones that were originally installed at the beginning of the 1960s. Nakira, her keen interest in dinosaurs, animals and the natural world around her ever growing and deepening, discovered documentary DVDs and Wikipedia, with the outcome that I believe nearly every child in her class has heard almost every word that David Attenborough has ever uttered. On their hundredth day of school the whole year had a "Hundred Days of Prep" celebration when they had to go to school dressed as something beginning with "P". We had many princesses, policeman, and pirates (Nakira's friend Helena went as the latter even sporting a well rehearsed Lands End accent) and some of the more unusual ones were pole-vaulters and even a Prime Minister sporting a red wig. And Nakira? - she went as a Parasaurolophus, a costume calling for a good deal of imagination on her part. I had a great deal of fun taking part in the group of parents who helped hearing the childrens reading in the mornings and it was fascinating to see the childrens' progress: almost all the children grasped the grounding concepts of reading - that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the space-separated blocks of letters and the words they spoke as well as the direction that text in their mother tongue flows in - stunningly quickly, I would say within three or four weeks. Thereafter, progress seems much steadier and more measured as the children begin slowly learning the look of the most wanted words one by one: what we would rather woodenly call "learning vocabulary". The journey, however, seems much more physical than academic (telling against what those two words would have us believe): the children grunt, knit their brows and pant with the sheer mental work of trying to sound out or guess at the meaning of each unwonted newcomer word and they dance little jigs on their seats and seem fit to burst with joy when their efforts suddenly unlock the meaning of particularly thorny bunch of symbols and evoke a shining, understood phrase or concept in their minds. An excursion to the zoo (which I got to be a parent helper for) had Nakira deciding that the stripes on zebras were put there so that lions could check their evening meals out at the supermarket through the barcode reader.

In November's second week, we holidayed in Cairns so that we could witness the total eclipse of the Sun that happened there on the fourteenth. Cairns looks set to deal out its wonted thick steamy hot cloudy November day and we had almost resigned ourselves to having the actual Sun shrouded from our view and to being happy with simply seeing the passage from light to dark to light again in the space of a few minutes. However at the last minute, the clouds opened and we got a stunning, clear view of almost the whole of totality from just before Bailey's Beads until just before the Diamond Ring (when the sun first shines out again from behind the moon at the end of totality). Mindal, Nakira and I were watching the total phase of the eclipse naked eye, and I had a stopwatch running so that we would put out protective goggles back on with a good margin of safety, i.e. about 20 seconds before the Diamond Ring, so that I felt we hadn't missed much when the clouds blocked the view just before the Diamond Ring. I was most impressed by the Sun's corona (its atmosphere) for one reads many times that the atmosphere is much hotter than the Sun's surface itself. This is of course with modern instrumentation trivially easy to prove and so one gets a bit blasé about such facts but even a high-quality photograph makes it look as though the corona could just simply be the Sun's light reflected from dust in space. But nothing is quite like witnessing it for oneself, even without instruments: the corona shimmers with a brilliant blue white glow, very different from the Sun's surface's yellow light seen a few moments beforehand, and one instantly grasps that this is something vastly hotter than the Sun's surface itself. It also has a weird, threaded look to it, most likely this is owing to channels of ions caught in the Sun's magnetic field. Nakira proudly told everybody she met that day that she'd seen the Sun's atmosphere, whilst I had Carly Simon's "You're So

Vain" playing endlessly in my head, doubtless for the line "...then you flew your Learjet to Nova Scotia to see a total eclipse of the Sun". If you don't know what I'm talking about then be thankful, the song is from 1972, albeit an iconic one, so most likely your ignorance is owing to that you've likely got significantly more years of life left in you than I have. The eclipse's twilight was not as dark as I had foreseen - there still seems to be quite a deal of light with a weird green cast to it - and Mindal and I giggled at the surreal sight of rows of people lined up on the beach staring skywards through the goggles. Maybe I didn't notice the deepest darkness because I was so enthralled by the eclipsed Sun itself.

In the last week in November I went to the US on business that Mindal and I have been working on for a little while in Atlanta, Georgia. One of the most impressive things near where I stayed was Stone Mountain, which supposedly is the "biggest exposed piece of granite in the world" (probably not true), but definitely has the biggest bass relief carving in the world showing the Confederate heroes Stonewall Jackson, Robert Lee and Jefferson Davis. In keeping with the South-of-Mason-Dixon-Line theme, the mountain draws further dubious fame from its top's being the site where William Simmons founded the born again Ku Klux Klan in 1915. It was likely for this reason that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke the line "Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia" in his famous "I have a dream" speech. Well, they must have run the pillow heads out of town, for Atlanta today is 70% black and on the whole seems to be an optimistic and thriving place. Or maybe, after the coming of nylon in the 1930s, some hapless Klansmen didn't read the "Not Fire Safe" warning on their sheets and stood too near to the burning cross. Imagine the midnight sight of a flaming line of shrieking dolts flapping its panicked way down Stone Mountain ...

On my way to Atlanta I stopped for three days in Arizona. This seemed to be a good place to recuperate from jet lag and I stopped in Tucson, where I have a few professional acquaintances and penfriends associated with the University of Arizona and the optical technology companies nearby. I got to see the landscape of "Roadrunner and Coyote" with its hallmark saguaro cactuses. In the flesh (or should I say in the chlorophyll), these plants are far bigger than you would believe from the impression you get from Western movies or "Roadrunner" and the like. They grow as high as four-storey buildings and are then about two hundred years old, more than a metre across at the bottom and weigh about thirty tonnes (bear in mind that that thirty wheeled semitrailer lorry slamming its brakes on behind you as pull up at the red light wondering whether this was the last thing you'll ever do will in all likelihood not weigh nearly so much). The Arizoners really like their cactuses, even the bus stops are styled in the shape of a saguaro. I found the landscape thoroughly beautiful. It rather reminded me in parts of the Hay plains where I spent a lot of my childhood and it even smelt a bit like the saltbush Hay plains. However, the stark difference was the mountains that sprouted straight out of the surrounding plains; this combination of plain and peak is almost altogether foreign in Australia and the only place I can think of here it is at all analogous is "The Rock" near Wagga Wagga. I got to see a mountain lion in the wild; it was dusk and I was walking a bit of trail along a stony creek bed. I spied this fellow skulking away from me out of the corner of my eye, and, when I turned my gaze towards him, he was clearly not happy at being seen. He fluffed up a little, gave a growl (I think so - there was a noise, but barely hearable) and then bounded away from me a few steps. He then stopped, looked back at me over his shoulder, did the fluffing and growling bit again and then bounded off into the bush. He reminded me a little of our cat Freyja when she is trying to look as though she is bravely standing her ground when either Zeus or the neighbour's cat Charlie threatens her. I was, not surprisingly, a little nervous, but was fairly confident I'd be okay. There are very occasionally attacks from mountain lions in the US, but these almost always happen when people flee the animal or otherwise make like prey. Unsuspecting joggers, for instance, have come to grief. This fellow was certainly pretty frightened of me, and I was thoroughly delighted to have seen one of these creatures in the wild, brief though the encounter may have been. I got to see lots of coyotes, but then this is not very hard. Incidentally, gainsaying the Loony Tunes story, coyotes run more than twice as fast as do roadrunners, and roadrunners are in fact predatory hunters of snakes and insects - they do not eat birdseed - so they would not in the least have been tempted by Wile E's baits.

Mindal's lucrative contract with HP ended in July and she found being away from work frustrating. It seems to Mindal and me that HP has achieved its goal of becoming the world's biggest computer supplier, only to realise suddenly that it has no strategic plan for what would follow that goal. So the company is thrashing about, chopping and changing projects, unable to find the confidence needed for decisiveness. In the last month, she's landed a job with a competitor company in Hawthorn. I'm highly envious of her bright, light-filled workplace on Glenferrie Road right next to Glenferrie station, with an excellent coffee shop at her doorstep. Only time will tell whether any corporate psychopaths

lurk amongst the staff, but the workplace does seem to have a good vibe about it. After years of being gadget free, she has found herself kitted out by her employers with an iPhone and MacBook, the former bothersomely crashing several times a day. She's somewhat disappointed that she couldn't find part-time work as she would like to work four days a week and thus reproduce the arrangement we had for Nakira was first born, but then our corporate culture is quite backward in this respect by most world standards. Mindal's working full-time and I two days a week, getting a third day in whenever I both can find a babysitter and am reasonably happy that Sascha can do without both of us for the third day. I firmly believe that, between the age of about two and three, the main play need is interaction with the carer (after a child finds out that their parents are indeed separate from themselves and is wracked with the fear of losing the relationship as shown by the clinginess that begins at about 18 months), the deeper understanding of the "theory of mind" that that interaction brings as well as the trust that one can be a social animal and rely on the "clan" to love them without exploitation.

Mindal, Nakira, Sascha, I as well as our furry beasts Zeus (the grand old man, now 16, is still with us) and Freyja wish you all a happy Christmas and the best 2013.



Nakira says hello to a black headed python in Kuranda



First day at school: Are you truly the same little bairn who grew inside me? Is this the little girl I carried?



First day at school: Nakira with Mrs. Ralph



It was Easter bunny, not René Descartes, who said "cogito ergo sum"



Happy 2nd Birthday Sascha ...



.. and happy sixth birthday Nakira



“Oh dear, I think Upsy Daisy’s wet!”



One hundred days of prep: the children go to school dressed as something beginning with “P”, and Nakira chose to be a parasaurolophus, and Sascha likes nothing more in the world than a cuddle with Mindal (“A Mummy Hug”)



Sascha slowly makes friends with Zeus: he adores his cats, who don’t needfully return the affection!



“Hey Mum, look what we dug up from the graveyard – he even reads to us if you pass enough electricity through him!”



Sascha’s Log, Diary of Life, Day 1047, Social experiment 1437B, Investigation into what happens when I tickle the right foot of unsuspecting big sister whilst assistant researcher IgglePiggle verifies observations



Sascha was urgently trying to tell me something for several nights about this outdoor lamp at the house we stayed at in Cairns – a few nights into our stay I finally understood what he was saying – “Gecko House”! Look carefully above the lamp in the meeting between the two walls and roof.